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ABSTRACT

Prior to the advancement of western education, Liberia had a system of indigenous education, taught by chiefs and respected village elders, and designed to perpetuate the Liberian culture. Formal or western education was introduced in 1830 when the Board of Managers of the American Colonization Society passed a resolution and later passed a public school law which mandated compulsory education for children 2 to 12 years of age. As schools were built, many children attended an indigenous school and a western school on an alternate basis. The challenge facing education today in Liberia is the reconciliation of the needs and wants of the people with the needs and wants of the country. Approximately 52 percent of the school age population attends school. Two critical problems are the almost total lack of appropriate instructional materials for the classroom and a shortage of qualified teachers. An innovative curriculum program, the Improved Efficiency of Learning Project (IEL) consists of specially designed programmed instructional materials which have an indigenous focus. Texts were written to reflect the cultural background of the Liberian people. The IEL system has produced superior academic achievement, increased enrollment, and cost savings. Indigenization of the social studies curriculum is a direct result of the IEL project. Curricular content and instructional materials were written by Liberians for Liberians. A list of ten references is included. (PPB)

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"Building an Indigenous Elementary Social Studies Curriculum: A Look at What's Happening in Liberia, West Africa"

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Building An Indigenous Elementary Social Studies Curriculum: A Look at What's Happening in Liberia, West Africa

H. Rose Adesiyan

Historical Background

Prior to the advancement of western education, Liberia had a system of traditional or indigenous education in the form of Poro and Sande societies which prepared boys (Poro) and girls (Sande) for active participation in the economic and political life of their communities. Students were taught vocations related to agriculture, bridge building, preservation of food, arts, crafts, music and public speaking. Indigenous educators, (chiefs and other highly respected elders), taught the vocations that would perpetuate the culture so graduates would occupy their rightful places in their towns and villages.

Formal or western education was officially introduced to Liberia in 1830 when the Board of Managers of the American Colonization Society passed a resolution and later promulgated a public school law which enacted compulsory education for children two to twelve years of age and specified one hundred eighty days to the school year (Synder, 1984). An earlier report (African Repository, III, 1827) documents an informal attempt at western education involving six schools in existence in 1827 with a total of two hundred twenty seven students in attendance. These early educational endeavors were established mainly in towns and settlements along the coast. Such schools were directed by missionary groups whose policies and activities were consistent with Christian evangelism. School curricula and teacher qualifications were determined by the missionary groups. Some of the educational principles were adopted from American education as transplanted by mostly American missionaries, while others were developed locally through experience. As additional schools were built, many children in the 'hinterland' attended the indigenous school and the western school on an alternate basis. Later, the indigenous school system reduced the amount of time students attended such schools.

In 1869, the Liberian government began an attempt to centralize formal education with the appointment of Commissioners of Education for the five original Liberian Colonies. The functions of the Commissioners were 1) to supervise public education, 2) to collect education funds, and 3) to determine educational policies. By 1912, various education acts were passed to establish a Department of Public Instruction whose authority extended to all schools except institutions of higher learning. In reality, however, the Missionary groups conducted their schools as usual. A unified course of study for the elementary schools was introduced in 1953. (Nearly ten years later, in 1962, the Department of Education introduced a curriculum for the secondary schools.) The Ministry of Education, the overseer of elementary and secondary education was established in 1972 (R. Clark, 1987).

Current Issues and Challenges

The challenge facing education today in Liberia is one of reconciling the needs and wants of its people with the needs and wants of the country, given its financial constraints. Education services are provided by the Government of Liberia and private institutions. The government provides sixty seven percent of the facilities for elementary education while private institutions, e.g., mission groups, provide thirty three percent of the elementary education facilities (Vani, 1987).

In Liberia today, approximately fifty-two percent of the school age population attends school. In 1982, primary school enrollment was 247,000. Efforts to expand access to schooling and to improve the quality of education have been made through externally funded programs and projects. These programs include the development of new school curriculum, construction of new schools, supply of equipment and instructional materials, and staff training (Biopich, 1984).

Two critical and continuing education problems facing Liberia are the almost total lack of approximate instructional material in the classroom and a marked shortage of trained and qualified teachers. These problems are "exacerbated by a severe and continuing shortage of funds for recurrent and capital costs" (IEES, 1986).

Desire for a New Curricula

In 1978, it was estimated that fifty-nine percent of the schools in Liberia operated without a school syllabus, about sixty percent of the children possessed no textbook, and few teachers had teacher's guides (Ministry of Education, 1984). Available texts were imported from countries of different cultural and environmental persuasions.

The Ministry of Education recognized there was a critical need to solve this problem of low quality of instruction and learning in Liberian School. A new curriculum innovation was designed in 1978; two years after the completion of research and on site visits to countries with similar problems and populations, e.g., the Phillippines and Indonesia. This innovation, called the Improved Efficiency of Learning (IEL) project, consisted of specially designed programmed instructional materials which had an indigenous focus. Texts were written to reflect the cultural background and activities of the Liberian people. The rationale for adopting such a program was based on the fact that programmed materials are simple for both the student and the teacher to follow, and such materials can be directly written for Liberian school children. The latter fact was extremely important because many of the texts in existence were expensive and written exclusively for pupils of other countries.

In 1979, the IEL project staff conducted an analysis of the elementary curriculum and converted the curriculum into specifications for modules or learning units and lessons which included indigenous visual materials. These specifications were formed for grades one to six in the five core subjects of language, reading, mathematics, science and social studies. The module specifications included titles and general objectives. Lesson specifications consisted of titles and performance objectives for every lesson in the module. All instructional design and test construction were based on these specifications (E. Clark, 1986).

Programmed teaching materials were designed to structure the teacher's behavior while programmed learning materials were designed to structure learner behavior. The system has undergone three series of evaluation by experts in instructional design and curriculum. These evaluators gave full approval to the system (Reeves, 1987).

The IEL system has also been evaluated to compare effectiveness via achievement tests results. The results of the final evaluation as reported by Kelly, 1984, revealed:

- IEL is an instructionally effective program that produces achievement superior to conventional classrooms in Liberia.
- IEL enrollment has increased significantly without requiring additional teaching faculty.
- IEL produces meaningful cost savings

Indigenizing the Social Studies Curriculum

Indigenization of the Social Studies curriculum resulted as a direct by-product of the IEL project in Liberia. The Liberian government saw the IEL project as an educational innovation which would involve Liberian educators firsthand and would result in a system which would be most feasible for the country. Elementary textbooks had to be written culturally correct with content remaining adequate, accurate, and consistent with the official National Curriculum. Visual materials had to reflect and be compatible with existing Liberian values, norms, and mores. Text indigenization was aided by the World Bank Textbook Program which stimulated text production by the Liberian Ministry of Education. The areas of Mathematics and Social Studies were selected as the first areas to undergo indigenization. Curricula content and instructional materials were written by Liberians for Liberians. Research studies (IEES 1986, Vani, 1987, Reeves, 1987) are continuing to evaluate the efficacy of this project. It appears to be an effective way to positively influence self concept and motivation for learning.

Note: Special thanks to Janice Vani and Ruth Reeves, current Director and Assistant Director, respectively, of the IEL project and Richard Clarke of the Tubman College of Education, University of Liberia for informational assistance.

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